

## THE SMILE THAT HOOKED ME FOR LIFE

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**I**n the summer of 1944 when I was nine years old I began to plan my life. Our family had just moved into a fifty-year old house, previously own by a white family, and I was allowed for the first time to walk the six blocks to the library in the George Washington Carver Grade School #87. My memory of the librarian is very vivid. I cannot remember her name but her smile is forever etched in my mind. This smile said, "This is a special place, only for you." I know there were other children who probably thought the same thing but in my mind she had prepared the collection for only me. That summer I decided that I would become a librarian. No matter what it would take, I would study hard and become a smiling face in the world of information. When I told my parents of my decision to become a librarian, they just looked at me with a curious stare and said, "Well, we'll talk about this when you get older."

I began planning my career that summer with extreme seriousness, watching every move and gesture of the librarian. I thought that if I mastered the "pencil/stamp" procedure, I would certainly have at least half of my library education. (For those of you who are too young to understand this skill—the librarian had a pencil with a stamp attached and when she checked my books out, she would stamp the due date on the book card without getting pencil marks on the card, and then write my name beside the date without getting stamp ink on my name.) I thought this act was the sign of a very intelligent and creative person. Of course, little did I know that the pencil/stamp would fall into the historical maze of technical instruments, never to be seen again.

My parents were avid readers, visiting Indianapolis-Marion County Public Library (IMCPL) Central Branch at least twice a month. My father borrowed how-to and self-education books, while my mother was a reader of fiction. I went along with them each time, but rarely checked out books. I felt the school library had the right mix of books for me, but I still enjoyed going to the "big library" downtown. One of the reasons for my parent's desire to read was that this was one of the few

free entertainment activities available during those years. In 1944, the city of Indianapolis was still segregated. Blacks were not allowed to attend the downtown movie theaters and some of the other entertainment venues. There were theaters in the black neighborhoods but often the films were not as current as the ones in the white theaters. My father continually said that this division in the races would not last forever, and my brother and I should be prepared to live in both the races. He thought that by reading a variety of books and magazines, we would be able to advance our education just as some had done in the white race. Looking back I feel that I was very privileged to attend an all black grade school and Crispus Attucks High School, the high school for black students. In my mind I had the "best of the best" teachers, those black teachers who were not allowed to teach in the white schools.

In January 1952, my last semester at Attucks, I finally attained my goal of working in a library. I had accumulated so many credits toward graduation, I took only one class during that semester and was free after 8:30 in the morning. I was told by one of my teachers that the Indiana State Library was looking for a student to work in the Mending Department. I was simply thrilled, to say the least. I interviewed for the job and was told to report for work that same week. My working hours were from 9:30-5:45 Monday through Friday. My salary began at thirty-five cents an hour and was increased to fifty cents beginning in June. I not only repaired the spines and covers of the books, but also relabeled the spines with titles, authors, and call numbers. Those eight months at the Indiana State Library helped to firmly anchor my desire for a career in librarianship.

When my parents and I talked about my career plans that senior semester, I continued to state that I wanted to be a librarian, but my parents said this was not realistic. The black librarians that were hired worked in the schools and frankly, I had never seen one in Central Library during the years I was growing up. It was decided that I would major in the Education courses at Indiana University. If there were any Library Science (LS) courses, I could minor in those courses.

When I found out that the School of Education offered LS courses, I just couldn't believe it. I not only took the hours necessary for the Indiana Certification of Librarian IV; I also completed an internship at the then University Grade School located on the campus of Indiana University. I was one of a very small number of blacks who were allowed to student teach and library internship at the all-white facility.

I signed a contract to teach elementary school classes in my last semester at IU and at the same time, I received notification that I could be hired as a librarian in most libraries in Indiana. I knew that working in a library was not possible at that time because all the school librarian positions were filled and there would not be any vacancies for many years. I settled into teaching in the fall of 1957 with the idea that someday I would be able to work with books. I loved teaching as much as working in a library and as my parents kept telling me, teaching was an admirable profession and there would be plenty of time to work in a library. I always read to my classes, introducing the classical books as well as the contemporary. I think it was about 1968, with money from a Title I grant, I purchased and cataloged about three hundred books for a library at one of the grade schools in which I was teaching.

It was in 1977 when I was hired by IMCPL as a children's librarian for the Central branch, that I realized my dream from 1944. I believe when I started working in 1977, there was one black staff member who was completing her MLS. I truly loved telling and reading stories to the children. Their faces can speak volumes of emotions. Actually, storytelling for me began when I was seven years old, in second grade, when I won second prize in the school's storytelling contest. I have been trying for years to find the story I told, "Why Daisies Have Pink Tips." I was told by the judges that if I had talked louder and smiled, I would have won first prize. (To those of you who know me—can you believe that I was ever that shy?)

My years at IMCPL (1977-80 and 1984-91) were exciting and rewarding; each year preparing me for the next. Every event or activity I planned or helped plan focused on bringing adults and children together with books. This experience has helped me to encourage my Library Science students to pursue a professional sharing of accurate and complete information with the public.

In 1986, I decided to apply for a position as manager of a small branch. It did not occur to me that my Master's in Education and Librarian IV Certificate were not enough credentials to do this. The LS classes I took in 1954 were outdated and I was told that I should return to school to earn a MLS. I began taking classes first on the IUPUI campus and then driving to Bloomington each semester, ultimately completing the

MLS degree in 1988. I continued taking classes in the spring semester of 1989, talked with a few of my instructors, family members and friends and decided to combine my two loves, teaching and library science. I was encouraged to apply for the Doctoral Program at SLIS and was accepted that same semester. I became one of a small select group when I was hooded at the graduation ceremony in Bloomington in 1993.

Since 1973 there have been only seven African Americans<sup>1</sup> who have earned a PhD from the Indiana University School of Library and Information Science. I was the last of the seven in 1993<sup>2</sup>. Why do so few African Americans and other people of color choose Library and Information Science as a chosen profession? I frankly do not have an answer to that question. I know that I was not thinking about acquiring a job that paid a "king's ransom" or one that was a high profile position. I just wanted to be a librarian and an instructor. I know that library schools will need to target the ethnic diverse segment of the population, and focus on the positive aspects of our profession.

As my scheduled retirement (May 31, 2004) approaches, I look back on my careers and can say without hesitation that being a librarian and more recently an instructor have been the brightest beacons in this eclectic life. For every class I try to instill in my students the fact that this is a noble profession and providing information is our quest for maintaining a firm foundation of our society. Yes, we can read about diversity in our culture, but sometimes a change in ideas does not begin with the written word; more often it is the spoken word that will move mountains of misunderstandings of a diverse population. I challenge every person who is working on a library staff to talk with another staff member or library patron about their beliefs and understandings about differences. I believe you can learn more about a person through verbal communication. Talking to a person of ethnic background can save you a tremendous amount of time and eliminate any tension. More advertisement is needed defining the mission of the library school as one that advocates inclusion not exclusion of the diverse populations. Where do we begin as educators? We begin when the child first holds a book. We can start in the pre-school storytelling sessions by introducing what the librarian does, then adding more information as the child progresses through the grades. By the time that child reaches high school, the term "library science" will have the same prestige as the medical and law professions.

As I mentioned previously, I will be retiring in a few months and I will be leaving with joy and anticipation of reading the books I have collected over the years. Presently my husband Bill and I are writing a book for Scarecrow Press. The working title *Revisiting the*

Harlem Renaissance: From a Visual Perspective, defines the focus, which is the visual artists of the 1920's and 1930's. These artists were ones who were part of the William E. Harmon Awards for Distinguished Achievement Among Negroes fine art competition. Three such artists lived and produced art in Indianapolis. For the last four years we have been conducting research in several cities: Washington, D.C. in the Manuscript Division, Madison Building at the Library of Congress; Archives of American Art; The National Museum of American Art; The National Archives, and the Moorland-Spangarn Research Center at Howard University. We have also researched in the San Francisco Public Library, Schomburg Research Library in New York City; Amisted Research Center, Tulane University in New Orleans; Woodruff Library, Atlanta; Broward County Public Library, Fort Lauderdale, FL, and Indiana University Main Library in Bloomington. Locally, we have almost exhausted the sources concerning the African American artists and the Harlem Renaissance at the Indianapolis Museum of Art; IMCPL; IUPUI University Library, and the Herron School of Art. It has been an exciting journey, gathering the information and most important and gratifying are the people we have collected as friends along the way. We continue to communicate with all colleagues in these cities, getting current information for the book. Retiring means beginning research for another book, for Scarecrow Press has already expressed an interest in publishing information on one of the African American art movements.

Our problem now, as we look into the future, is finding a vacant wall in our house to put yet another bookcase for our art books and fiction collection. We can't seem to put a period on collecting art books, and we probably won't. Next year we will continue our travels, seeking out more libraries and archives and their collections.

## FOOTNOTES

1 The terms black and African American are use interchangeably.

2 This information is current as of 12/2002.